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TAGS: [PREL](#) [BE](#) [AF](#) [IS](#) [RU](#) [GG](#) [UP](#)  
SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN WEXLER'S MEETING WITH BELGIAN MFA  
OFFICIALS

Classified By: Political-Economic Counselor Richard Eason, reason 1.4(b)  
) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: On November 12, Congressman Robert Wexler, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Europe, met with Dirk Ahtens, Director General for Bilateral Affairs of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Vincente Van Assche, Secretary to the Director General. Both Belgian officials were eager to hear Wexler's description of the foreign policy priorities of the incoming Obama presidential administration. Wexler told Ahtens and Assche that Obama intends to open a dialogue with Iran, but warned that if dialogue does not produce a change in Iranian policies, Europe will be expected to support strong measures against Iran. Van Assche pointed out the difficulties of forging a European consensus on strong measures, and doubted that Iran can be persuaded to give up its nuclear program. He sees the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as central to the problems in the Middle East, including Iran, and urged the USG to push for sacrifices on both sides to settle it. Ahtens expressed concern about the security situation in Afghanistan and the difficulty of establishing a well-governed state there. He called for a genuine dialogue with Russia on international problems and reinvigoration of CFE and other arms control efforts. However, he said that the U.S. and Europe cannot show weakness in such discussions. The Belgians expect an intensified interest in Africa under the new administration, which they share. They were discouraged that they have been unable to persuade the EU to take action in the Eastern Congo, but did not see a chance for unilateral Belgian intervention. Ahtens and Assche put considerable faith in dialogue with entities such as Iran and Russia. Their intense interest in the new administration's policies suggests that with diplomatic effort, they could be convinced to support actions the new President intends to take as well. End Summary.

MORE COMPATIBLE WITH EUROPE  
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12. (C) Wexler said that the new administration brings with it both opportunities and pitfalls for the transatlantic relationship. He said that President-elect Obama will have a world view more compatible with the Europeans on issues such as climate change, Iraq and Guantanamo. The number of serious differences will be less than under the Bush administration, he believes. However, Wexler said, Europe should be prepared to adjust its policies to the changes that will come. For example, Obama will probably begin to build up a dialogue with Iran, beginning at low levels. However, if the Iranians do not respond well, the new president will need strong support from Europe for both "sticks and carrots" to ensure change in Iranian policy. Those who support a dialogue will lose credibility and the transatlantic relationship will be damaged if, for example, European companies are still doing business as usual with Iran after more active diplomacy fails to produce results, Wexler said.

BELGIANS SEE ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT  
CENTRAL TO PROBLEMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST  
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13. (C) Van Assche said that because of its inherent need to compromise and find consensus internally, Europe will always be what he described as a "soft power". Belgium can be of assistance to the U.S. with Iran, he thinks, having had recent contacts because of the abduction by bandits of two Belgian citizens traveling in Iran in 2007. Iran wants to be recognized as a regional power, Van Assche said, and without that, it will use other means to assert itself. He was not sure that Iran can be persuaded to give up its nuclear program, but it is worth a try, he said. Iran has differences with other players in the region among the Afghans, in Iraq and with Al Qaeda. However, it has been fearful of the U.S. aim of regime change. Direct dialogue with the Iranians can probably change a lot of things, he concluded. If sanctions are needed, they must be worldwide, since the Chinese and Indians will likely be willing to step in and supply Iran if the Europeans alone go along with sanctions. Van Assche noted that European banks have ceased doing business with Iran even without sanctions, as a commercial decision, provoking complaints from the Iranian government.

14. (C) Van Assche agreed that Europe will need to show more solidarity with the United States in the future. He pointed to Afghanistan, where Belgium sees intervention as justified and has sent over 500 troops. Still, he continued, it is necessary to build up the state's functioning there. This will be difficult, as such a state really has never existed

in Afghanistan before, he added.

15. (C) Van Assche put emphasized a perceived need for a new approach to Middle East policy. While Israeli actions do not justify terrorism, they are a factor to be considered and create anger among the Arab people, he said. The Belgians and Europeans feel they have little influence over Israel, far less than the United States, which is a "big friend" to Israel, in his words. He added that if the U.S. will not press Israel over its actions in the occupied territories, or over settlements, Europe feels powerless. The key question is whether the USG is ready to push courageously for sacrifice on both sides, he concluded. Wexler replied that there will be no difference in substance between the Bush and Obama administrations in their approach to the Israel-Palestinian issue. However, there will be a difference in the sense of urgency for a solution, and Iran and Iraq are more pressing issues, Wexler said. There is little the United States and Europe can do to resolve internal differences among the Palestinians. They can support economic development, for example, but Hamas will have to make its own decisions about cooperating for peace. Another difference will be U.S. support for Israeli initiatives, such as its talks with Syria via intermediation by Turkey. Finally, however, any progress with Syria or the Palestinians is undermined if the Iranians are not engaged and are causing problems. Wexler said he sees a consensus developing in Israel for more comprehensive talks on a broader range of issues. At the same time, one must be realistic, he said. The United States is involved in two wars, has a serious economic crisis, and problems loom in Pakistan. However, if Europe spends the same energy as the United States on Middle East issues, it will mean progress, Wexler said. Achters agreed that it is important for the United States and Europe to work together. Van Assche warned, based on his experience, that the Iranians are very skilled negotiators and the USG must have a clear strategy before entering into discussions with them. Wexler said that President-elect Obama took a political risk by endorsing discussions with Iran and he reiterated that Europe has a special role to play in support of such a policy.

AFGHANS NEED SECURITY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE  
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¶16. (C) Achtens said that prospects in Afghanistan are "not bright". Elections may be held, he said, but they are not worth much if the result is election of warlords to Parliament and thereby their legitimation. The U.S. and Europe must encourage good governance and appropriately vet candidates, he said. Wexler said that the arrival of General Petraeus, who is highly respected, may well bring a better result. Defense Secretary Gates is also viewed as doing a good job, and is likely to stay on after January, he added, with support from both Democrats and Republicans in Congress.

#### DIALOGUE WITH RUSSIA, BUT FROM STRENGTH

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¶17. (C) Achtens said that Minister De Gucht is convinced that a genuine dialogue with Russia must continue, although the U.S. and Europe cannot appear weak. Part of the reason for the Russians' new aggressiveness, he said, is their feeling that they have been ignored and their interests slighted for too many years. The USG had a lot of sympathy in Russia after 9/11, he said, but then the Russians saw a change in U.S. policy, exemplified by missile defense in the Czech Republic and Poland. While Russia's foreign policy is clumsy and its domestic regime is "not nice", they should be involved in appropriate ways in international problem solving. Turning to the Georgia conflict, Achtens said that Russian claims of a sphere of influence in the Caucasus are not a good thing. The U.S. and Europe must talk to Russia until they understand they must behave properly, he said. He speculated that the Russians will soon understand that they are weaker than they think, having lost a lot in the economic crisis and in falling oil prices. Achtens said that it is important to re-emphasize the CFE and arms control and get Russia back into that framework.

#### A NEW EMPHASIS ON AFRICA

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¶18. (C) Achtens suggested that the U.S. has not been very interested in Africa up to now, but that may change under President Obama. Wexler agreed that there is a much higher focus and level of expertise among Obama's advisors about African issues than ever before. The President has hands-on knowledge, passion and interest which will translate into

higher interest in the State Department, Defense Department and other USG agencies. Achtens said that Belgium had strongly supported sending an EU mission including Belgian troops to the Eastern Congo. It was not able to act on its own because of its involvement in Afghanistan and its limited military resources. However, he said, Belgian officials know the region, are supported by a great deal of public interest in African issues, and are ready to help. The main hindrance to controlling the conflict in the Eastern Congo is the lack of any structure of a stable state structure in the Congo, he concluded.

#### COMMENT

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¶19. (C) Comment: The Belgian officials with whom Congressman Wexler spoke were clearly eager to hear his opinion of the directions U.S. foreign policy will take under the Obama administration. They focused on a harder USG line with Israel as a key to making progress in the Middle East and elsewhere. They betrayed a preference for discussion over action, but were skeptical themselves about Europe's ability to speak with a strong, unified voice. While they welcomed the possibility that the new administration will be more open to dialogue, not only with Europe but also with Iran, Russia and others, they offered little in the way of creative thinking and a clear policy designed to reach a result. The curiosity and interest in the new administration's policy directions displayed by Achtens and Assche suggest that Belgian foreign policy makers may be willing to support U.S. interests more actively in many areas if they are cultivated

assiduously by incoming administration officials. End  
Comment.

BUSH

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